

Prison Labor: Some Facts and Issues

by Karen Miller

Prison labor: the words conjure images of chain gangs, laundry and license plates. The reality behind the words is the growing reliance of many industries on the cheap, plentiful labor force provided by America's prison system.

America is not in short supply of this 'resource': the total incarcerated has reached about 2 million in the year 2000; "get tough on crime" laws, "three strikes," and increasing arrests for non-violent drug-related offenses have pushed the incarceration rate to more than 600 in 100,000 in 1999 (O'Meara 14).

Given the climate of the country, it's not likely we'll see a great reduction in prisons soon. But while exploitation of labor in a profit-oriented society such as ours is perhaps inevitable, the outcome of promoting that exploitation is grim. The danger is for both the prisoner and the non-prisoner. It is both moral and economic.

Looking at the history of prison labor, it becomes quickly evident that history is beginning to repeat itself. In the 1800s, prisons recouped their expenses by leasing convicts to private companies; in 1885, fully three-quarters of prisoners were involved in some form of labor, mostly for private companies or individuals (du Pont, "Some Benefits of Prisoner Labor"). This had little to do with attempts at rehabilitation. Prisoners were forced to work without pay, often in dangerous conditions; convict miners were killed in cave-ins in the 1800s (Leonhardt A1). In 1887, Congress for the first time attempted to outlaw the leasing of convict labor to private parties (Ingley 28+), but there was backlash at the state level: refusal to house federal prisoners.

Increasing pressure came from reformers and unionists as the nineteenth century closed. Prefiguring the attempts at prison reform in the Sixties and Seventies, Zebulon Brockaway established the Elmira State Reformatory in New York in 1876, which offered the "first prison programs in education, athletics and job training and... the first experiments with parole" (Ingley 28+). An attempt to use prison labor during a strike at the Tennessee Coal Company in 1891 (Lafer 66+) ended with a surprising show of solidarity; mine workers "stormed the prisons, released the convicts, and burned the prison to the ground." Certainly the miners were most interested in protecting their own jobs and rights, but the fact that they thought of the prisoners at all is significant.

What finally drove legislation restricting prison labor was the Depression and the increasing fear that private jobs would be lost to cheaper convict labor. The 1935 Hawes-Cooper Act, along with the Ashurst-Sumner Act of 1940, outlawed interstate trade in convict-made goods, making it a felony and a federal crime to traffic in them (O'Meara 14; du Pont, "Some Benefits of Prisoner Labor"). Subsection (b) of the Ashurst-Sumner Act does exempt goods made in State prisons for use by any prison in any other state, or federal prison-made goods for use by any other federal prison (Ingley 28+). Congress banned prison labor use on federal contracts exceeding \$10,000 the same year (du Pont, "Some Benefits"); the Walsh-Healey Public Contracts Act placed limits on the purchase

of prison-made goods by the federal government (Ingley 28+).

However, by 1979 the climate had changed. That year, the Justice System Improvement Act was introduced; this repealed the limitations imposed by the 1935 Hawes-Cooper Act and the 1940 Ashurst-Sumner Act on interstate trade in prison goods. The Justice System Improvement Act established seven Prison Industry Enhancement programs (PIEs), which allow for businesses to contract prison labor for their projects, and to engage them in interstate commerce (O'Meara 14). This act also amended the Ashurst-Sumner Act, exempting goods "made in a designated pilot project" (Ingley 28+) -- effectively taking the teeth out of the earlier legislation.

As it stands now, the Nineties have seen an increasing trend toward privatization of prisons themselves and the attendant increase in private companies availing themselves of prison labor. Arizona has re-instated the chain gang; Oregon's state Constitution was amended in 1994 to require that all prisoners work a 40-hour week or be "in training" (Perlman 42), as well as requiring the state to actively market prison labor (Lafer 66+).

But the road to corporatization of the penal system is not all smooth. In 1997, conflict between state and federal laws on inmate pay for private industry work prevented Oregon from shipping its "Prison Blues" jeanswear across state lines (Perlman 42). Massachusetts state law (1998) prohibits employment of inmates by private companies; the law states that "no prisoner shall be employed outside the precincts of his place of imprisonment doing work of any kind for private persons" (Vasquez B1). Georgia in 1999 ruled that it is illegal to replace paid employees with free prison labor ("Don't Fill Paid Jobs" 14A) as well as using prison labor in private, for-profit facilities. New York state law permits "state-use" only in regard to prison products -- sale of goods is permitted to government agencies only (du Pont, "Some Benefits"). Legislation is pending regarding opening of prisons to all private companies, and one bill is pending that would require state-run prison operations to compete with private companies, and allow them to hire federal inmates (Leonhardt A1). The year of 1995 saw a spate of bills designed to make it easier for private enterprises to make use of prison labor: the "No Frills Prison Act" (HR663) which would require all able prisoners to work a nine-hour day or face solitary confinement; a proposed amendment to the Fair Labor Standards Act which would exempt certain programs from paying inmates the federal minimum wage (HR868); and a bill that would require inmates to work a minimum of 48 hours a week (S930), among others (Ingley 28+). As of this writing, these bills are still in committee.

And in a nod to Edwin Meese III's vision of "factories with fences," former inmate and entrepreneur Bill Robinson, in an article in *The Financial Times*, announced that he had received financial backing for his proposed \$22 million prison project in Texas, "devoted entirely to employing volunteer inmates in private enterprise" (16). The prison, which he hopes will be a model for others, is projected to open this autumn. Volunteers or not, it is clear that use of prison manpower is the wave of the future.

So, one wonders, what does the employment of inmates offer private companies? What does it offer society? And not least, what does it offer the inmates who are employed?

The usual justification for employing prisoners is rehabilitation. Where "breaking rocks"

can be considered a form of out and out punishment, the claim of rehabilitative labor must show two things: that the skills and experience gained be useful for employment on the outside; and that documented rates of recidivism drop and that they be directly related to inside employment. No one can deny that the prospect of gainful employment can be a powerful incentive for staying out of jail; some convicts have even written letters and articles on the subject. A prisoner working as a printer says that his experience gained him not only skill, but pride in his skill and in his value of himself as a worker (Bratt C1). Other articles have described convicts lovingly restoring antique cars and making stained glass for the New York, New York Casino in Las Vegas (Perlman 42), certainly more glamorous and skillful employment than stamping license plates or doing garment piecework. But it should be noted these are exceptions rather than the rule. A garment sewer in prison has little to look forward to in the garment industry outside the walls, besides low wages and exploitation; never mind that most garment shops are located overseas. Reese Erlich asks in "Workin' For the Man" if the circuit board assembler in a Texas prison is really going to be a competitor for the immigrant women who do those jobs on the outside (63).

The rehabilitation argument sounds good, but in practice, Gordon Lafer notes, "even a cursory examination of how prison industries are administered makes clear that the motivation... has little to do with rehabilitation" ("Captive Labor" 66+). CORCAN, the trade name for Correctional Services Canada, claims "we're running [it] as a business deliberately to give them a chance to practice what it's going to be like when they get out" ("Profiting from Prison Labor" 54); CORCAN claims a 25% drop in recidivism for those who have taken part in one of their training programs. Lest it be thought that CORCAN is doing this purely out of a sense of social responsibility, it should be noted that they reported revenues of \$60 million in 1998.

Studies like the 1983-87 Federal Post-Release Employment Project suggest that "employed prisoners do better than others without jobs" (du Pont, "Some Benefits"). Both Ohio and Florida claim 50% drops in recidivism for those who held "high skill" jobs while in prison -- what these are is not detailed -- with some unspecified drops for so-called "meaningful jobs" (Perlman 42). Despite the admission that most inmates will not be able to have the same jobs on the outside (Erlich 63), administrators of prison work programs consistently claim that this "job training" is connected to recidivism rates. In addition, employers tend to look for convicts who already possess the skills necessary for certain jobs (Lafer 66+) as well as lifers and long-timers, in order to minimize training and turnover (Wright 30) -- the very people who are usually considered to past rehabilitating.

Another reported benefit of prison labor is its utility in helping wardens manage the prison population. Tony Ellis, director of Prison Industries at the South Carolina Department of Corrections, claims that "work is the best management tool wardens ever see"; not only do prisoners "put in a productive day" but "we know where they are" (Perlman 42). This is a more easily demonstrated benefit than the claim of rehabilitation and job training. The enervating boredom of being locked up is somewhat relieved by having a job to go to and some pocket money, and a tired convict is a less aggressive convict. Boredom is a powerful motivator in prison.

Sometimes it is claimed that having prisoners work will help defray the cost of imprisonment to taxpayers. Unfortunately there is no evidence to bear this out, though it makes a good "sound bite." Tighter sentencing and the high cost of building prisons makes prison labor inevitable, and "in a climate of fiscal restraint it is nearly impossible to raise taxes to cover the full cost of prison expansion" (Lafer 66+). Where this argument fails is in the economic realities of prison contracting. Though prisoners are supposed to be paid the prevailing wage, according to PIE legislation, this usually translates to minimum wage, with the state being entitled to withhold about 80%. The savings in wages don't get passed on to the taxpayer. The state (i.e., the taxpayers) pay for construction that companies need, reducing income from property taxes the businesses would otherwise have to pay, and higher paying jobs may be lost in the community to prison contracts, with loss of tax revenue (Wright 30). With the cost of maintaining each inmate, in order for the state to break even, each inmate would have to gross at least \$160,000 a year (31).

Where the real benefits of prison labor are most apparent are in the bankbooks of the companies that make use of it. As mentioned above, the PIE programs that resulted from the Justice System Improvement Act requires that prisoners be paid the "prevailing wage." In most cases this means the federal minimum wage; in some cases it is slightly better. This however does not apply to goods which are exported or which are to be used in intrastate commerce. Besides the low wage, the business is exempt from having to pay unemployment insurance, worker's compensation, or health insurance (O'Meara 14), or "anything that you might otherwise have to pay for in the free world" (Liu 16). One may hire, fire or reassign at will, for any reason (Lafer 66+). The availability of the prison worker delights Omega Pacific owner Bert Atwater: "the workers are delighted with the pay... don't come in late because of rush-hour traffic or sick children...[and] don't take vacations" (Wright 30). There is no threat of unionization, since prisoners are not permitted to organize.

The company saves on rent, receiving free space for manufacturing as well as free electricity and water (O'Meara 14). In Canada, even minimum wage legislation is nonexistent ("Profiting" 54). In Oregon, you can lease a ten convict work crew for only \$30 a day (Lafer 66+).

Lowered overhead equals increased profits: Kwalu, Inc., a company which employs prisoners making plastic seating, expects to make \$80 million in the next five years (Liu 16); Lockhart Technologies went from paying non-prisoners \$10 an hour to paying prisoners minimum wage plus only \$1 a year in rent (Wright 30), effectively cutting its costs by half. In 1994, prison industries sales reached \$1.31 billion (Erllich 60). Oregon State Representative Kevin Mannix encouraged Nike to relocate from its Indonesia factories back to Oregon prisons, saying, "we can offer competitive prison labor [here]" (Harr 30).

Morgan Reynolds, an economics professor at Texas A&M and a fellow in the National Center for Policy Analysis, claims that open competition for prison labor would raise prison wages, making them comparable to non-prison wages (Bratt C1). This seems to be an incredibly naive statement, given that the private companies that are making use of prison labor aren't doing it for humanitarian reasons, but to cut costs. More expensive

prison labor would be less appealing to the bottom line. In addition, it isn't at all assured that competition would drive wages in this context. Prisons have the advantage of a bored, restless, and utterly captive workforce.

That captive labor force is an advantage for those companies, like Hawaiian Tropical Products, that used to have to import low-pay workers from Micronesia and Mexico to pick and package fruit (Perlman 42). It also has the attraction of being suited for seasonal and short-demand work, since the prison can assemble any size work force on very short notice to meet demand (42). Repetitive, unattractive jobs can be easily filled; as one employer says, it's difficult "to get someone to sit for seven or eight hours a day and polish a bolt until it shines" (42) on the outside. On the inside, those who don't rush to fill the jobs -- and they do rush -- can be coerced.

An added bonus for companies is the opportunity to tack "Made in USA" labels on the goods that are prison manufactured. The resulting image boost is not a negligible factor in marketing. As the vice president of Kwalu, Inc. points out, "we're employing Americans, they just happen to be incarcerated" (42). Significantly, it is the image, not the reality behind the image, which is important.

Behind the pros for the companies, there are some very big cons for the convicts. Substandard or sweatshop conditions are commonly reported. Prisoners are made to work overlong days, and put in overtime without compensation (Liu 16); some former inmate workers for CMT, a garment company, were able to file a lawsuit claiming that their 60-day training was unpaid, that they were given unrealistic quotas, and were instructed to replace Honduran tags in garments with "Made in USA" labels (16). What would be minor issues in a non-prison workplace are punished extravagantly: pay is docked for "cussing" and telephone privileges are taken away. Pharmaceutical companies Parke-Davis and Upjohn were open about having "exploited the skills" of inmates by making them work 16-hour days (Sawyer 213).

Lest anyone think this is the kind of situation that would be improved by widespread privatization of prisons, the rebellion at a privately-run INS facility in 1994 provides an example of what happens when corporate interests are given free reign. Esmor, a "private corrections company," was exposed by federal investigation to have substandard conditions after the detainees at their New Jersey facility rebelled, having complained about "inedible food, dirty clothes and insects in the beds" (Erlich 59). The investigation turned up evidence that food, repairs and guard salaries had been cut down specifically in order to make a profit. The number of privately-run prisons has doubled since 1994, despite being investigated by state and federal authorities for civil rights violations, denial of medical treatment, and poor food and living conditions (Harr 29).

Pay is another factor. As mentioned, PIE requires that a "prevailing wage" be paid. However, the Department of Corrections can deduct whatever they see fit, for "cost of incarceration, mandatory savings, victims' compensation, Social Security and Medicare" (O'Meara 14). If a prisoner is paid minimum wage, about 10% of that is actually pocketed (Liu 16). Despite PIE, actual wages range from about .25 to \$7 an hour (Leonhardt A1). Prison Blues workers in Oregon get .28 to \$8 an hour, but 80% of the higher wage is withheld, yielding a "take-home" pay of \$1.60 (Erlich 60). Mandatory training is paid at a

lower rate or not at all. Kwalu, Inc. demands 160 hours of training, at .50 an hour (Liu 16).

Inmates have no union protections and no bargaining power. They have no right to organize or strike, no means of filing a grievance or complaint, no right to circulate an employee petition or newsletter, and no right to call meetings (Lafer 66+). Occasionally a lawsuit gets filed, as in the case of two California prisoners who claimed they were put in solitary for complaining about substandard working conditions (Leonhardt A1). Charles Ervin and Shearwood Fleming talked to a local television show about their suit, then claimed that they were "fired, put in solitary confinement for more than 45 days and... transferred to another prison" (A1). Airing a grievance in the public media, if one can, seems to be the only effective means; lawsuits take time and money, and while prisoners may be swimming in the former, they don't have much of the latter.

In this context, worker exploitation takes on a whole new meaning. It has been noted that prisoners want to work; at the same time, refusal to work can put you in "disciplinary housing," loss of canteen privileges, loss of "good time credit" necessary for sentence reduction (Erllich 58). The stakes are higher than on the outside. One is working for freedom. Paul Wright refers to it as real "wage slavery" (28); he quotes an inmate who points out that an industry job "consumes virtually all of your out-of-cell time... this limits your ability to visit with your family and attorneys, do legal research, go to school..." (29). Another inmate asserts that it's not like slavery "because that implies it is compelled... it's more like serfdom, [or] a domesticated animal" (29) which some might argue is only marginally better.

There are definite downsides for the public as well. Weakening of labor protections is one. As noted, there is a history of using prison labor as scab labor. Then too, there will of necessity be a lowered standard for the "free" workers whose employers now have to compete with cheap, domestic prison labor. One need look no further than Los Angeles for a recent example of the utility of prison labor in circumventing unions (Riccardi B8). Los Angeles jail workers in the process of a union drive were fired, replaced with inmate workers, then a week later, more private sector workers were hired to replace the inmates. Employers were thus able to legally lay off 207 workers making \$6 an hour, replace them with free labor, then go back to private workers at a reduced wage. Jim Rodriguez of the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 770 claims that this "sent a message to... new employees."

A more immediate effect of prison labor is the displacement of free labor. PIE requires that investigation into the displacing effects of prison labor on the local economy be made, and that the interests of local businesses be protected (O'Meara 14). In practice this is glossed over or ignored. Since the Oregon mandate, many public sector jobs have been filled with convicts, many private sector companies have laid off workers; 100 union construction workers have been replaced by Umatilla inmates, and union laundry workers have been displaced by prison laundry contracts (Lafer 66+). Ohio prisoners working for Honda were paid \$2 hour, displacing United Auto Workers who had fought for decades to achieve \$20 or \$30 an hour (66+). In 1999, Crisp County Solid Waste Management Authority (Atlanta) replaced 50 workers (including 35 former welfare recipients) with unpaid prison labor, which in Georgia is illegal ("Don't Fill Paid Jobs" 14A); Chip Wells,

board chairman of the Authority, believed that the Authority paid inmates directly in order to get around the Georgia prohibition of privately employing prisoners (the company doing the recycling was a private firm, Environmental Technologies Group) (Cook 1A). Gordon Lafer notes that this case "shows how easy it can be to flout restrictions on the use of prison labor" (66+). Lafer, a professor of political science at the University of Oregon, calls the worry over displacement "a decent sized problem that is poised to explode." Among the concerned are the AFL-CIO (Perlman 42), the Teamsters, and the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, which includes corrections officers (66+). Oregon voters are considering whether to repeal the mandate.

Oregon isn't the only state with labor displacement problems. In Texas, Wackenhut, a prison operations company, flouted the PIE directive on consulting with local labor (Erllich 62). As a result, 150 electronics jobs in Austin paying \$10 an hour were lost to prison labor. And in regard to concerns over a company called New Products' switch to prison labor, Pete du Pont of the San Diego Union Tribune wrote, "the government's first responsibility is to citizens, not narrow interest groups. New Products benefits all Americans." Narrow interest groups like Americans struggling to hold onto jobs in the current market, or those interested in preserving labor protections will be surprised to learn that, apparently, "citizens" means "corporations."

Use of prison labor, according to the Trade Union Federation of New Zealand, diminishes possible job growth in the larger economy. According to their 1997 report, "use of inmates during the set-up stage of a new business minimizes the risks of failure" but ultimately excludes outside workers from jobs, while "it increases profit margins" it "lessens the likelihood of real job growth" (Norgate 6). There are safety issues for the public, especially in cases where work gangs are not competently supervised, or where private information about citizens is gathered (in the case of marketing research, telemarketing, and credit card reservations for airlines or hotels). Lower quality goods and services are more likely in this "McPrison" atmosphere (O'Meara 14).

There is another, nastier conclusion lurking behind the drive for cheap goods and services. If prison labor is a profitable resource, then it follows that one must ensure a steady and plentiful supply of labor -- or as some executives call the convicts, "raw materials" (Harr 30). Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) and Wackenhut, as prison operations companies, are paid on a "per prisoner, per day" basis; they can expect to gross "\$12.78 million every year for the duration of their contract unless the prison population decreases" (O'Meara 14). CCA reported a net income of \$484.5 million in the first nine months of 1998 (Harr 29). Since inmates equal job security, these companies have "strong motivations" for keeping up incarcerations (31). Growth of prison population and the costs of imprisonment "suggest there will be strong pressures to put more prisoners to work" (Lafer 66+). Stock returns are another reason those in a position of power may have incentive to pass tougher laws on imprisonment; the wife of Lamar Alexander, former governor of Tennessee, received over \$130,000 in returns on CCA stock (Harr 31). The present governor received campaign donations from CCA (31).

The fear that profit-based prisons will undermine the civil rights of the prisoners and institute literal "wage slavery" is not unfounded, given the history and the present reality of prison operations. Roger Sawyer, in his book *Slavery in the Twentieth Century*, notes

"in the rapidly expanding private sector... there is a built-in conflict between the prison manager's wish to achieve profitability and his power to dispense the 'good-time credits' which affect prisoners' chances of earning parole" (214).

A full survey of the ethical problems inherent in prison labor would take another paper, but I can outline some questionable points here.

Is the drive to use prisons as profit-producing institutions undermining justice? America has had an uneasy time with crime and the tension between punishment and rehabilitation. The current revival of chain gangs and the drive for mandatory prison labor are examples of the newly punitive spirit, despite the US Justice Department statistics that point to a widespread drop in crime. "Rehabilitation" is a word largely used in the names of prisons; rehabilitation of criminals, true rehabilitation, would necessitate a rehabilitation of society's current values.

There are those who see the trend of privatization of prison ownership, management, and labor as an example of capitalism going too far. Don Murray of the National Association of Counties asks, "is it appropriate to delegate deadly force to a private company... would we turn over the Army to a private company because they can run it cheaper" (O'Meara 14)? There is discomfort with the notion of a corporation taking over certain functions of government. Is it really ethical for a business organization to have the power of life and death over private citizens? The ex-director of the National Sheriffs' Association, Buddy Moser, voices his own discomfort: believing that choices should center on the "well-being of the community," he asks "how can you make money off of something like incarcerating people" (14)?

The specter of slavery rears its head. But there remains the idea that while the *image* of slavery is despicable, the *substance* of it is acceptable as long as it's done for the "good" of someone: the prisoner, the market, the country. If anything, the current flap over "Chinese slave labor" has taught the US that it's okay, as long as we don't have to see or experience it ourselves -- that the arbiter of right and wrong in the marketplace is the bottom line. A consultant for the Bureau of Justice remarks that some companies are shy of hiring prison labor in America, because "they don't want to be *smeared with this image* [*italics mine*] that they're hiring Chinese slave labor or something close to that" (Liu 16). I think the choice of words is particularly telling.

But is it comparable to slavery? One inmate quoted above thinks so; another calls it closer to "serfdom" in that slaves are "compelled." A serf or a prisoner can be compelled in a different way -- starvation or loss of "good time," solitary confinement meant to beat the spirit or effectively being cut off from emotional and legal support. All three, of course, can be punished physically. Inmate Daniel Harr argues that "the private prison ventures are solely designed to profit from the transfer, housing, and utilization of human beings, the very essence of slavery..." (30). As far back as 1972, the National Council of Crime and Delinquency declared that prison industries "have exploited the prisoner as a slave worker of the state..." (Sawyer 211). Certainly in most cases the prisoner has committed a crime, but once inside, they become "temporary slaves in all but name" (211). A mandate derived from the Thirteenth Amendment permits "slavery or involuntary servitude" only as a punishment of criminals (210). Article Four of the UN Declaration of Human Rights

(1948) declares "no one shall be held in slavery or servitude: slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms" (Harr 31). Certainly the dehumanizing aspect of treating humans (convicted criminals or not) as "raw materials" for increasing profit is the first step to slavery.

What interests me most is what this all says about our ideas of what work is, what it should be, and how we relate to it. To ask someone their ideas about prison labor serves as a test of their ideas about labor in general. In my opinion, the world of prison labor is a rawer microcosm of the world of free labor. Edwin Meese's "factories with fences" sounds even more disturbing when you realize that all factories have fences. Alienation is alienation, and exploitation is exploitation; whether one is exploited on the inside of the fence or the outside is a matter of degree, not kind. It doesn't help that the anger of free workers and inmate workers is misdirected: union members are not inclined to think of prisoners as comrades in arms in the fight for fairness in the workplace, but as stealers of jobs, when their anger should be for the company that stole their livelihood; and the inmates, preoccupied with the narrow scope of their daily lives and glad for the income, are not disposed to care whether they are helping to drive down the market price of labor. As one inmate puts it, "Fuck society, they locked me up" (Wright 29).

Pull one thread, and you begin unravelling the whole fabric of our society: unsavory preoccupation with crime and increasing demand for punishment, but ignorance of the root causes of crime and the goals of punishment; satisfaction with image over substance, sound bites over complexity; lip service to American ideals and simultaneous repudiation of the realities of democracy. The economic reality is that we are working harder and harder for less and less, and the psychological reality is that we are accepting this, because we can still see the grass when we look through the bars on our windows.

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